

HARRIS AND SELWYN THEATERS

180 and 190 North Dearborn Street

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
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HARRIS AND SELWYN THEATERS

180 and 190 North Dearborn Street
Chicago, Illinois

Architects: C. Howard Crane and H. Kenneth Franzheim

Completed: 1922

The Harris and Selwyn theaters were built in 1922 by prominent New York theatrical producers Sam H. Harris and Archie and Edgar Selwyn, and were designed by the same architects. Called the "Twin Theaters" at the time of their opening, the two buildings are similar in proportion and design. The facades of both are classically treated, but the specific details differ. The facade of the Harris employs Italian Renaissance details, while that of the Selwyn is based on later English classical styles. The theaters were built at a time when legitimate theater flourished in Chicago and stage productions abounded. During the subsequent years, some of the city's most memorable performances occurred in these theaters, and today the Harris and Selwyn are reminders of an important era in Chicago's theatrical history.

The Development of Theater in Chicago

Theatrical productions in early Chicago consisted mainly of touring stock companies and local actors performing in simple frame buildings used as theaters. By the beginning of the 1900s, the city had grown in size, affluence, and sophistication. With the improvement of cross-country transportation, professional companies became regular attractions for the citizens of Chicago. Actors, actresses, and producers were attracted to Chicago because of the many superb theaters available for theatrical productions. By 1880, over twenty-five theaters had been built and were being used for a variety of stage productions.

Appearing around the turn of the century were George M. Cohan's "Forty-five Minutes from Broadway," starring Jay Templeton at the Colonial, and "Sherlock Holmes' Zaza," starring Mrs. Leslie Carter at the Grand Opera House. In 1898, the

Rogers Brothers were playing at the Columbia; at the same theater in 1897 Lillian Russell had played in "The Wedding Day." Dan Daly played in many programs; his earliest appearance in Chicago was in "The Belle of New York" at the Columbia in 1898. The famous actress (and George Bernard Shaw's long-time female correspondent) Ellen Terry was also at the Columbia in 1900 playing in "Robespierre." Ethel Barrymore was at the Illinois in "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines" in 1902; Richard Mansfield played "Cyrano de Bergerac" at the Grand Opera House in 1893; Anna Held was at the McVickers in 1900 in "Papa's Wife"; Otis Skinner played "Prince Otto" at the McVickers the same year; and the Four Cohans were at the Great Northern.

During the 1922-23 season, when the Harris and Selwyn theaters opened, Chicago had ninety-eight shows, twenty-two of them musicals, playing in nineteen downtown theaters. Some of the theaters which were then being used for stage plays and are today still standing are the Apollo (now the United Artists), the Auditorium, the Blackstone, the Playhouse (later the World Playhouse), the State Lake, the Studebaker, and the Woods. The State Lake Theater was also used for a variety of vaudeville shows during this period.

The Harris and Selwyn Theaters

The Harris Theater was built by Sam Harris, and the Selwyn was built by Archie and Edgar Selwyn, all prominent New York producers. At the time, it was not uncommon for producers to own and operate theaters; this both reduced the production costs on their own plays and enabled them to profit from the plays of other producers who rented the theaters. The Selwyns knew Sam Harris in New York; together they decided to retain an architect to design adjacent and similar theaters in Chicago. The site they chose at the southwest corner of Dearborn and Lake Streets was not very desirable for office space because of its proximity to the elevated train lines so the theaters were not incorporated into an office structure, as were many others of the time.

Sam H. Harris had been a partner of George M. Cohan who owned the Grand Opera House in Chicago, then called George M. Cohan's Grand Opera House. Harris was also a partner of Irving Berlin and together they owned the Music Box Theater in New York City where the famous "Music Box Revue" was performed during the 1921-22 theater season. The Harris Theater opened on September 19, 1922, with a production of "Six Cylinder Love," a comedy by Chicago playwright William Anthony McGuire, starring Ernest Truex and June Walker.

The Selwyns owned a theater in Boston and three in New York in addition to the Selwyn here. Edgar was also a leading actor and playwright, while Archie's business acumen helped make them successful producers. The Selwyn Theater opened on September 18, 1922, with a production of Somerset Maugham's "The Circle," starring Mrs. Leslie Carter and John Drew. The *Chicago Daily News* of September 19, 1922, described the opening of the Selwyn:

The new Selwyn Theater is an exquisite donation of comfort and beauty. On stage there were varied excitements ranging from a curtain speech by John Drew made as only John Drew, God Bless him, can make them, to some forbidding apparitions of blazing lights and things with cranks involved in a business of turning the assembly into a movie. Lofty sentiments were expressed by Corporation Counsel Ettelson, representing your mayor, and Archie Selwyn, the host of the evening, emerging long enough to plant a kiss on Mrs. Carter's cheek.

The relationship that Sam Harris and the Selwyns maintained with New York producers made possible a wide variety of theatrical productions at the Harris and Selwyn theaters. Between 1922 and 1954, many popular stars performed in the theaters, including Ethel Barrymore, Helen Hayes, Katherine Cornell, Charles Laughton, Margo and Burgess Meredith, Boris Karloff, Sam Jaffe, Noel Coward, Ed Wynn, Tallulah Bankhead, Mae West, Audrey Hepburn, Patricia Neal, Eartha Kitt, and Ralph Bellamy.

Each theater is a simple rectangular block, connected to the other at the rear. Originally a narrow alley led from Dearborn Street to the connecting section at the rear. This alley today is closed at the front by an addition to the lobby of the north theater. Each building is approximately eighty-five feet wide and one hundred feet deep. The structures are the same height, each being three stories or approximately forty feet high. The Dearborn Street facades are faced in terra-cotta made to resemble stone. Both facades are classically treated but differ in specific details. The Harris is based on Italian Renaissance precedents and the Selwyn on later English classical styles. Each facade consists of a wide central section flanked on either side by a corner block. The main entrance and lobby to each theater is located on the ground floor of the southern corner block. To the north is a series of four exit doors, three located in the central section and one in the north corner block. The exit doors are multi-paneled french doors. Flanking the central door are two sign boards surrounded by handsomely detailed metal frames. At the northernmost corner of each building is an inset sign board with more elaborately detailed metal frames.

Above the ground floor of each theater a continuous string course sets off the two-story upper portion of the facade. The upper portion of each theater is treated as an arcade with five blind round arches. Three are in the central section and the other two are in the flanking corner blocks. The three central arches contain pedimented windows; originally balustrades marked the bottom of these window openings. The two end arches of each theater contain a pedimented niche for sculpture. The southern niche of each contains a sculpture of Thalia and the northern one contains a sculpture of Terpsichore, Greek muses related to the theater. Corinthian pilasters flank the arches in different patterns on each facade.

Of the two facades, the Harris is the more simply treated. Continuous banded rustication marks the facade of the Harris. It is interrupted only by the pairs of smooth Corinthian pilasters that flank the north and south arches. A band of ornament is

inset into and follows the outline of each arch. Above the broken pediment in each arch is an elaborately ornamented escutcheon panel. A classical entablature terminates the facade and has the name of the theater incised into it. Above this was a balustraded parapet. The balustrades have been removed and replaced by concrete screens.

The facade of the Selwyn is divided in three sections by prominent rusticated piers. The three arches in the wide central section and the single arch in each end section are flanked by fluted Corinthian pilasters. Abutting the rounded arches are panels of floral ornament in terra cotta. A terra-cotta volute marks the top of each arch. A flat disk-like ornament is set into each arch. Like its neighbor, the Selwyn facade is topped by an entablature with the name of the theater incised into it. Above this the balustraded parapet remains intact. The Lake Street facade of the Selwyn Theater repeats one complete bay of the main facade in terra cotta. The western portion of this facade is face brick trimmed with terra cotta. In a later remodeling the entrance and lobbies of both theaters were altered and the original marquees were removed and replaced by marquees of a simple contemporary design.

The Architects

The architect chosen to design the twin theaters was C. Howard Crane of Detroit who collaborated with Chicago architect H. Kenneth Franzheim. Crane was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1885 and began his career in Detroit, Michigan, in 1904. Apparently successful on his first job, he was by 1906 chief draftsman for the firm of Field, Hynchman, and Smith of Detroit. By 1908, he had established his own firm in Detroit and later had offices in New York; Chicago; Windsor, Ontario; and London, England. Specializing in design of theaters, Crane built more than 200 in the United States, Canada, and England. Two of his best known were located in New York: the Music Box Theater and the Theater Guild House. During the Depression of the early thirties, Crane left the United States and established a practice first in Milan, Italy, and later in London, England. While in Milan he designed Italy's first skyscraper. In London, Earl's Court has been described as one of Crane's greatest architectural achievements. It was considered the world's largest exhibition hall around 1937, its approximate date of construction. The building was located on an eighteen-acre site, over a network of six railway lines, containing a 118-foot-high arena with seating for 30,000 people.

Although Crane maintained regular contact with his office in Detroit and was a member of the American Institute of Architects, he did not return as a resident of the United States. After the war he helped in the re-building of London, designing housing, factories, and industrial facilities. Crane was considered a distinguished international architect and was nominated as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects shortly before his death. He died at the age of sixty-eight on August 14, 1952, at his home in London.

Crane's associate Franzheim was born in 1891 in Wheeling, West Virginia, and

graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1913. His first architectural office was in Chicago, and in 1921, he established himself in New York. In 1929, he was commissioned by several aviation companies to design some of the earliest airports in this country, including ones in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, St. Louis, Cleveland, Baltimore, Houston, and New York. His commissions included the City Auditorium in Houston, Texas, seating 25,000 and built to order for the Democratic National Convention in June, 1928. He also designed the Gulf Building, a Houston skyscraper; the Harris, Forbes and Company building in New York; the DeWitt Clinton Hotel in Albany; and the Newburgh Hotel in Fort Worth, Texas. In 1950, he received the American Institute of Architects Award of Merit for Foley's Department Store in Houston. Franzheim died in Mexico City on March 18, 1959, at the age of sixty-eight.

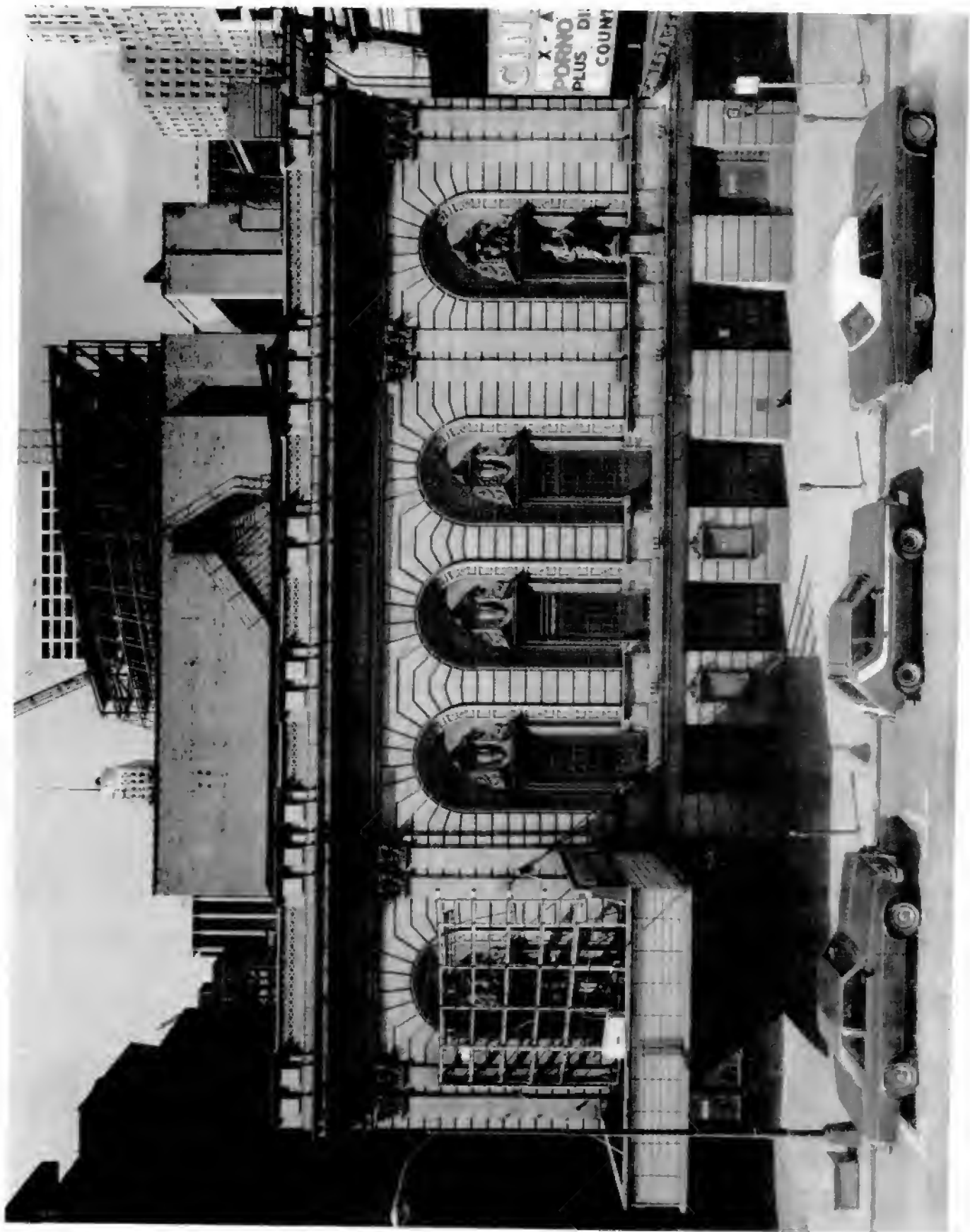
Later History

In the early 1950s Hollywood producer Michael Todd bought the theaters and changed the name of the Harris to the Michael Todd Theater and the Selwyn to the Cinestage Theater. They continued for a few years to be used as legitimate theaters. The last theatrical production performed at the Selwyn was "Hatful of Rain," in October of 1956. The Harris remained a legitimate theater a brief time longer.

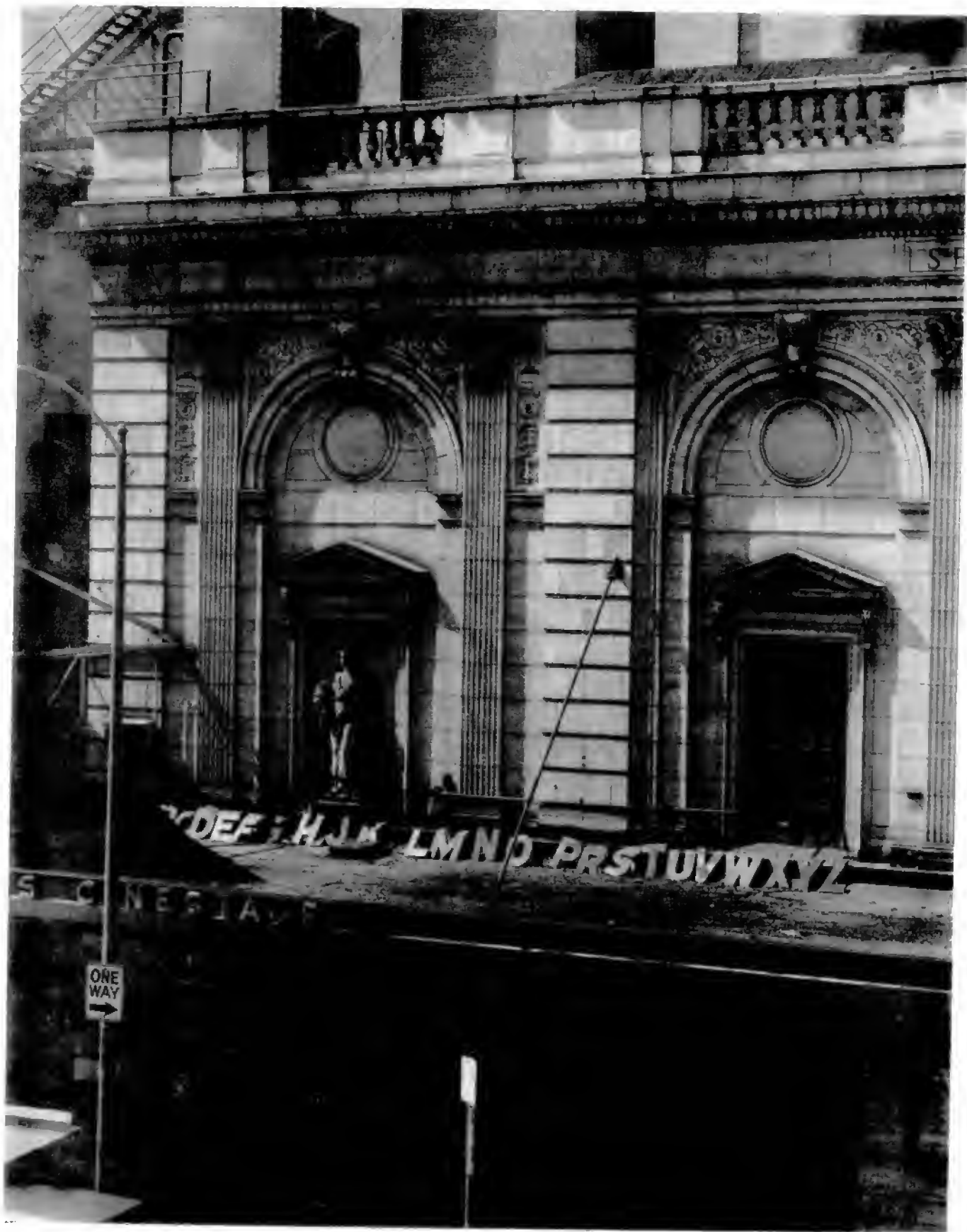
Major interior alterations were made to convert the theaters into first-run, wide-screen movie houses. The Selwyn (Cinestage) opened as a motion picture theater in 1957 and the Harris (Michael Todd) in 1958. Some first-run movies that appeared at the theaters are: "Around the World in 80 Days," produced by Michael Todd, "The Sound of Music," and "2001: A Space Odyssey." The Harris (Michael Todd) functioned as a movie theater until April of 1977 when it was closed for an indefinite period. The Selwyn (Cinestage) remains open.

The Harris and Selwyn, referred to as the "Twin Theaters" at the time of their construction, were unusual because, unlike many theaters being built at this time which had commercial and office space incorporated into the building, they were exclusively theater space. They were of a subdued and classical architectural style rather than the extravagant styles of many other theaters of the time. The theaters were known for the warm and intimate atmosphere which made viewing the stage productions a pleasurable experience. For over three decades many of the best theater productions were presented to the citizens of Chicago in these theaters. The Harris and Selwyn theaters contributed to an important era in the theater history of Chicago and testify to the rich theatrical heritage of the city.











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